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**Testimony of the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK)
Joint Legislative Public Hearing, Environmental Conservation Portion
2022-2023 Executive Budget Proposal
01 February 2022**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein and honored legislators, my name is Cathy Pedler, ADK Director of Advocacy, and I am very pleased to have the opportunity to represent our 30,000 members to testify today on the Governor's Executive Budget Proposal.

Ten Million for New York's Forest Preserve Parks in EPF State Land Stewardship

The **Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks** collectively represent over 6.5 million acres of land which is **nearly a quarter of New York State**. The Adirondack and Catskill regions serve as home and recreation lands to **over a million residents in Forest Preserve counties**. In addition, there are more than **25 million visitors to the Adirondacks and Catskills each year bringing \$3 billion to regional economies annually**. Since it is managed as wild forest lands, the Forest Preserve of the Adirondack and Catskill Parks can be susceptible to damage and deterioration from increased recreational use. In our current climate crisis, the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks serve as the lungs of NY, a great force to combat climate change as its forests provide oxygen and sequester carbon. They protect critical habitat, and provide fresh drinking water to more than 25 million people in two countries, including residents of New York City.

Ensuring **support for the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks checks all the boxes:** health and recreation, environment, community, inclusivity, safety, and economy. Last year, ADK, the Catskill Center, and 24 other organizations and municipalities agreed and **urged the governor to include funding for critically needed services in the Forest Preserve and the Adirondack and Catskill Parks**, including trail work, recreational infrastructure, and educational outreach. On January 5, in **the State of the State, the governor responded by proposing that the EPF be used to support** investments into these very efforts, and now the \$50 million in the Executive Budget Proposal for the State Land Stewardship line of the EPF backs up her commitment. **We respectfully request that \$10 million be dedicated specifically to the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks in the State Land Stewardship line of the EPF.**

At least **\$10 million of the \$50 million is needed in the State Land Stewardship Account for the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks** for investments in helping New Yorkers enjoy the Adirondacks and Catskills safely and responsibly, including projects designed to address increased recreational use through

- comprehensive planning (\$550,000)
- trail crews (\$4 million)
- trail safety and climate resiliency (reroutes, and trail bridges, \$2.5 million)
- accessibility and inclusivity (\$600,000)
- educational stewards to engage visitors (\$500,000)
- trailhead infrastructure (\$350,000) for orientation and sanitation facilities
- community infrastructure (\$1 million) for parking, orientation, education, and sanitation facilities
- project funding and support for the offices of the newly appointed Catskill and Adirondack Park Coordinators to implement recommendations by the Stakeholder Strategic Planning Advisory Groups for the High Peaks and for the Catskills, the HPAG and the CAG, (\$500,000).

To ensure that at least \$10 million is dedicated to the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks **a line should be added in the EPF under State Land Stewardship**. The following is suggested language:

"notwithstanding any law to the contrary, not less than, \$10,000,000 for Catskill and Adirondack Parks projects to protect the Forest Preserve and provide safe, accessible, and inclusive recreational experiences with an equitable distribution between the two parks." Last year a line item was added under State Land Stewardship for "Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety and wilderness protection activities to address issues relating to overuse" with \$1.55 million of dedicated funding.

Environmental Protection Fund

Governor Hochul has proposed **the largest ever EPF** in her Executive Budget. Her landmark proposal to increase the EPF by \$100 million, from \$300 million to **\$400 million**, will advance work to protect our environment and improve quality of life in every county of New York State. We applaud the Governor's proposal and **urge the Legislature to support a \$400 million EPF** during budget negotiations. This funding marks a huge step forward on the path to achieve the environmental community's long-term goal of a \$500 million EPF. **In the EPF, we were pleased to see \$50 million for State Land Stewardship, \$40 million for open space and land conservation, \$17 million for combatting invasive species, and \$13 million for environmental justice and DEIJ initiatives.**

We are also **happy to see the funding** under State Land Stewardship for the important work of the **Adirondack Visitor Centers** at SUNY ESF and Paul Smith's College, and we look forward to seeing the line for the **Catskill Visitor Center restored during the 30-day amendment period, "\$150,000 to the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development for the support of the Catskill Visitors Center."**

Adirondack Park Agency (APA)

We are **pleased to see in the Executive Budget Proposal an increase in staff and funding** for the Adirondack Park Agency (APA). The **APA received 4 new positions**, some of the recently open retirement positions have been filled, and APA has funding in the Executive Budget Proposal for a new office. The APA has been understaffed for years. With an increase of 4 FTEs in the Executive Budget Proposal they now have a total of 54, **and there continues to be a need to grow the staff of the agency.**

Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)

We are also **pleased to see an increase in staff and funding** for the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). In order to continue to maintain the critical resources of the Forest Preserve Parks it is an absolute **necessity to increase staffing levels at DEC** which is currently operating at 1980 levels and is 250 positions below the staff cap imposed by the former administration. We are especially concerned about insufficient staffing levels in the Division of Lands and Forests. This division of DEC provides planners, foresters, and scientists to ensure that public land units containing thousands of miles of recreational trails, parking lots, campgrounds, picnic areas, boat launches, and protected forests and habitat are accessible and safe. The Division of Lands and Forests also provides supervision and coordination of the many Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) funded projects, as well as volunteer projects, for essential stewardship work such as maintaining trails, keeping infrastructure like lean-tos and fire towers in good operation, and educational outreach that protects delicate alpine summits, pristine aquatic habitat, and diverse visitor experiences. In the Executive Budget Proposal DEC was allotted 94 positions. Our request was for a total staff level of 3,300, the Executive Budget Proposal provides 3,108. **Thirteen** of the 94 are appointed **to the Lands and Forests Division**. It is our **hope that at least two positions within Lands and Forests will cover the recent appointment of the Forest Preserve Coordinators and that the Forest Rangers will also have the funding and staff positions they require to support new recruits** (see below).

Forest Rangers

We are encouraged that the Governor and the legislature have heard **the call to support the New York State Forest Ranger force** with their own Ranger Academy and 40 slots for new recruits in 2022. The Forest Ranger force is a critical piece of Forest Preserve recreation infrastructure and ensures that visitors have safe experiences that also protect the natural habitats they explore. When people get lost or injured on the Forest Preserve, the Forest Rangers are there to get them safely back home. **Although a 40-person Ranger academy is approved we are unsure if a fill level for Forest Rangers to support the new recruits has been approved.** In the year ahead, it is absolutely necessary that the current investment in 40 new

Forest Ranger recruits is supported by the necessary equipment, vehicles, and the appropriate funding increases needed to support the new positions.

DEC NY Works Capital Funding

We were also very **happy to see \$90 million** for DEC in NY Works funding, an increase of \$15 million from FY22. This is a great step, but we were calling for at least \$100 million for DEC who manages 5 million acres state-wide (including more than 900,000 acres of conservation easement lands) and over 2,300 miles of trails, 3,000 lakes and ponds, and 30,000 miles of rivers and streams in the Adirondacks alone. **NY Works funding for DEC capital projects must continue to increase** to match the responsibility that DEC has for the protection and maintenance of state lands and recreation infrastructure across New York.

'Clean Water Clean Air Green Jobs' Bond Act

We **applaud Governor Hochul** for her proposal to increase the Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act to a total of \$4 billion. We look forward to working with the Governor and State Legislature to help ensure voters have the chance to realize this historic opportunity in November when it should appear on the 2022 general election ballot across New York State. The Bond Act will help us create a safer future by protecting clean drinking water, modernizing critical infrastructure, conserving family farms, and restoring wildlife habitats while providing access to nature for more people.

Clean Water Infrastructure

We **applaud Governor Hochul** for proposing funding for upgrading water infrastructure. We are pleased to see \$500 million for clean water infrastructure in her Executive Budget Proposal, as clean water is essential to the health of communities in the Adirondacks, Catskills, and across New York State. The total need for upgrades across the state is estimated to be \$80 billion over the next 20 years, so **\$500 million is a step in the right direction, but the need is much greater.**

Support Catskill Park Coalition and the Common Ground Alliance Priorities

One of the unique features that distinguishes the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks from other state parks is that the **Forest Preserve Parks have communities within their boundaries** where people live, work, and raise their families. These communities and their businesses are part of the fabric of the Parks and they **provide lodging, food, entertainment, and emergency services to park visitors.** The Park Towns and Villages, as integral parts of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks, **need infrastructure support for quality of residential life and for safe and enjoyable visitor experiences** that help support regional economies. In the Adirondacks, the [Common Ground Alliance \(CGA\)](#), and in the Catskills, the Catskill Park Coalition (CPC) regularly meet to collaborate on whole park issues that include the needs of communities within the park as well as recreation and ecological concerns. Each year the CGA and CPC set priority agendas for the year ahead. There are **many items in the Executive Budget Proposal that align with the CGA 2022 priorities**, including the \$25 billion 5-year housing plan, funding programs for small businesses, the New York Forward program to "advance the renaissance of our smaller downtowns;" the \$400 million EPF with its funding for the Adirondack Diversity Initiative, climate smart communities, state land stewardship funding supporting recreation; funding for broadband, child care, and the \$4 billion dollar 'Clean Water Clean Air Green Jobs' Bond Act.

The CPC has **three main areas of priority for investment in the Catskill Park.** Public safety and resources to manage the Catskill Park are critical, with investments needed to 1) increase the number of **Forest Ranger staff** patrolling the Park; 2) **increase staffing levels within the NYSDEC's Division of Lands and Forests** in Region 3 and 4; and 3) **Grow and maintain Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)** investments in the Catskill Park. This includes funding for the **Catskills Visitor Center**, the **Catskill Science Collaborative**, Cornell University's "**Save the Hemlocks**" Initiative, community **Smart Growth**, Grants, upgrades and improvements to the state-owned **Belleayre Ski Center**, funding to support **Park education efforts, and infrastructure improvements** and maintenance. Investing in local Catskill economies is critical to community sustainability and includes projects with direct community benefits that address increasing visitor pressures like developing a swimming area at the Kenneth Wilson State Campground, and implementing and constructing the previously approved mountain biking trail system in the Shandaken Wild Forest.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment today. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions or advice as we continue to advocate for the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks.

Sincerely,

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ADK (Adirondack Mountain Club) works to protect New York State wild lands and waters by promoting responsible outdoor recreation and building a statewide constituency of land stewardship advocates. Based out of the Adirondack Park in New York State, ADK is a leader in providing outdoor education, promoting responsible recreation, and organizing stewardship experiences. Since 1922, the organization has worked to increase access to the backcountry by building trails, conserving natural areas, and developing a stewardship community that supports the ethical and safe use of New York's outdoor spaces. A member, donor, and volunteer-supported organization, ADK reaches across New York through its 27 chapters to inspire people to enjoy the outdoors ethically.